

What is bullying?

Bullying can be defined as repeated aggression, be it verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against others. Bullying is behaviour that is intentionally aggravating and intimidating and occurs mainly in social environments such as schools, clubs and other organisations working with children. It includes teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting and extortion by one or more children or an adult, against a victim.

Is bullying harmful?

Persistent bullying can have a devastating effect on a child's self-esteem. Children may feel the bullying is somehow their fault, or that there is something wrong with them. They may become withdrawn and insecure, more cautious and less willing to take any sort of risk.

Being victimised in this way can cause days of mental anguish and leave lifelong emotional scars. It has driven some young people to try to murder their tormentors and others to suicide. A child who has suffered bullying often needs professional counselling to let out his/her feelings and rebuild self-confidence. Bullying also affects any child who witnesses it.

What do children get bullied about?

Some of the factors involved in bullying include:

- puberty
- peer pressure
- gender differences
- stereotypes/prejudice
- structure of the group - hierarchy of dominance
- family background of victims and bullies.

Bullying can be distinguished from bossiness and boisterous play. A bossy child will boss whoever is around because of a lack of self-control or skills of negotiation or compromise. Boisterous play can be dangerous but it does not involve young people wilfully setting out to hurt or victimise.

Young people often grow out of this kind of behaviour as they grow older. What distinguishes bullying from bossiness or boisterousness is that the bully always picks on someone less powerful and more vulnerable. Persistent 'slagging' has the same devastating effects as bullying and should not be ignored.

How would you know if a child was being bullied?

All bullies operate using furtiveness, threats and fear. Bullying can therefore only survive in an environment where the victim does not feel empowered to tell someone who can help or in which it is not safe to do so.

The following indicators are warning signs that a young person might be getting bullied:

- reluctance to come to a centre or take part in activities
- physical signs (unexplained bruises, scratches, or damage to belongings)
- stress-caused illnesses - headaches and stomach aches which seem unexplained
- fearful behaviour (fear of walking to a youth meeting, taking different routes, asking to be driven)
- frequent loss of 'subs' or shortage of money with vague explanations
- having few friends
- changes in behaviour (becoming withdrawn, moody, irritable, upset, distressed, stammering)
- not eating
- attempting suicide or hinting at suicide
- anxiety (shown by nail-biting, fearfulness, tics)

Of course, there are other possible reasons for many of the above.

What makes a person bully others?

Bullies are often making a plea for help through their violent behaviour which may reflect a sense of insignificance. Bullies whose activities go unaddressed often fail socially and academically in later life. They need to be taught all important negotiation and cooperation skills, working with others rather than competing.

Who should deal with bullying?

While the more extreme forms of bullying would be regarded as physical or emotional abuse and are reportable to the health board or An Garda Siochana, dealing with bullying behaviour is normally the responsibility of the organisation where it is taking place.

How can bullying be prevented?

Modules on raising awareness and developing techniques for dealing with bullying should be included in training. An **anti-bullying policy and code** should be drawn up and enforced and procedures should be clearly established to deal with any incidents. While it is important to have rules about bullying, a whole group policy is the best solution. This means not 'bullying the bully' but working with bullies and the group of young people, helping them to understand the hurt they are causing, and so make the problem a 'shared concern' of the group. Group discussion methods have a big advantage over punishment in that they do not drive the problem underground or escalate it by making the bully more excluded or more of a social failure. This is known as the '**no blame approach** (see below).

What practical steps can be used to counter bullying?

- Use young people as a positive resource in countering bullying and to change the culture of the group to a 'permission to tell' culture rather than a 'might is right' one.
- Teach young people to negotiate, cooperate and help others, particularly new or different children.
- It is a good idea to run poster campaigns and have stories and role plays on how to deal with a bully included in ordinary group activities.
- Offer a victim immediate support and put the 'no blame approach' into operation.
- Never tell young people to ignore bullying. They cannot ignore it - it hurts too much.
- Never encourage a young person to take the law into his/her own hands and beat the bully at their own game.
- Tell victims there is nothing wrong with them and the bullying is not their fault.

What is the 'no blame' approach?

Step 1 - Interview the victim

If you find out that there has been an incident of bullying, first talk to the victim. At this stage find out who was involved and what the victim is now feeling. Try asking the following questions:

- Was it verbal or physical intimidation?
- How hurt is the victim?
- Was the bullying within his/her own peer group?

Assure the victim that his/her name will not come out in the investigation and actively listen.

Step 2 - Meet with all involved

Arrange to meet with all those involved, including some bystanders, those who may have colluded, those who joined in and those who initiated the bullying.

- Have maximum of six to eight in the group to keep the number controllable.
- Make a point of calling a 'special' meeting.

- Ensure the severity of the topic is understood by all.
- Speak only of the hurt caused in general terms with no reference to the victim.
- Play on the consciences of all by asking questions such as: How would you feel? Would you like this done to you?

Step 3 - Explain the problem

The distress being suffered as a result of the bullying incident must be explained. At this stage the details of the incident or the allocation of the blame/initiators is not discussed. Explain how it feels to be lonely, left out, rejected, laughed at. Try asking these questions:

- Would they like it if this happened to them?
- What can we do to see it does not happen again?

Listen, watch out for reactions and pick up on any without isolating anyone.

Step 4 - Share the responsibility

Explain what steps/controls may have to be introduced to prevent further incidents and how everyone will lose out as a result.

Step 5 - Ask the group for ideas

At this stage the group is encouraged to suggest ways which would make the victim feel happier. All positive responses are noted. Use phrases such as 'if it were you' to encourage a response. Listen to all suggestions and note them.

Step 6 - Leave it to the group

Now the problem has been identified and solutions suggested, the problem is handed over to the group to solve. Arrange to meet again in a week's time. Pass responsibility to the group and give a time frame within which something must be done.

Step 7 - Meet the group again

With each member of the group, including the bully, discuss how things are going, who is doing what and whether there have been other incidents. This allows for continual monitoring and also keeps all involved in the process. Again enforce the idea of the 'team' looking after one another to ensure it is known that bullying or intimidating behaviour will not be tolerated.

ANTI-BULLYING CODE

(Personal Safety Statement)

- We provide a place where every member can feel secure
- We provide a place where it is known that bullying is not acceptable behaviour
- We provide a place where name calling is not tolerated
- We provide a place where no one suffers abuse of any nature
- We provide a place where no one is victimised
- We provide a place where each member is supported and listened to
- We provide a place where it is each member's responsibility to ensure that all are treated equal
- We provide a place where solutions to problems are the concern of all

